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Communities examining effect of single-family zoning on housing issues look to GR example

BY SYDNEY SMITH (/CONTACT/SYDNEY-SMITH)

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As communities nationwide begin to examine the effects of single-family zoning on the density and affordability of housing, Grand Rapids has emerged as an example of how cities can function in the absence of those regulations.

When it rewrote its zoning ordinance in 2007 as part of a new city master plan, Grand Rapids eliminated most single-family zoning. At the time, the effort focused on growth principles to provide for a variety of different housing types at diverse price points.



Contrary to what believers in single-family zoning might think, “the world hasn’t come to an end,” said Suzanne Schulz, the managing director of design, development and community engagement for Grand Rapids.

“It speaks to all these different types of housing you might have,” Schulz said. “It’s not just the nuclear family.”



Ryan Kilpatrick, executive director for Housing Next

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In any of the residential and mixed-use commercial districts, the city allows for a range of housing types. Most projects need only administrative approval, although some require a special land use permit.

“We have 12 years of experience with not having exclusive single-family residential zone districts, and it’s now a new and novel idea among cities across the country,” Schulz said.

Increasingly, communities have cited single-family zoning as a possible cause of various housing challenges, and describe the practice as a decades-old product of racism. In many cases, the local municipalities have concluded that single-family zoning limits supply and reduces urban density in areas where it could be needed.

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The issue has even crept into the Democratic presidential candidates’ plans to alleviate housing challenges nationwide.

Some cities and states have already started to take action. In December, the city of Minneapolis voted to approve a plan that would eliminate single-family zoning as a classification and allow residential structures with up to three dwelling units in every neighborhood. The move comes as an attempt to chip away at segregation and address affordable housing issues, according to the Minneapolis 2040 plan website. The comprehensive plan still needs to be approved by the regional Metropolitan Council.

In Oregon, the state House and Senate this summer passed a measure that requires cities with more than 10,000 people to allow duplexes in areas zoned for single-family residences in an effort to restore the “missing middle” housing. The governor is expected to sign it, according to multiple reports.

Meanwhile, California in January placed a hold on a bill that would ease restrictions on housing density in public transit corridors and job-rich areas.

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‘Hard conversations’

Because communities have long prioritized single-family zoning, many of them struggle with conversations to dismantle the status quo, said Ryan Kilpatrick, executive director for **Housing Next**, which works alongside communities in Ottawa County on a range of housing and affordability issues.

Kilpatrick said many homeowners take issue with the idea of relaxing the rules on single-family zoning, citing the need to protect their investments.

Many communities nationwide seem to agree with homeowners. On 75 percent of residential land in many American cities, it is illegal to build anything other than a single-family home, according to an analysis by the *New York Times* and UrbanFootprint, a software company that maps the effect of development and policy change on cities.

Even so, Housing Next is exploring the elimination of single-family zoning with communities in Ottawa County.

“There are some communities that are really ready to take this on, and really have hard conversations about what change looks like and how to manage that change effectively, and there are other communities that are much more eager to look at the low-hanging fruit that is underutilized commercial retail property, where we could build higher density and not necessarily put a lot of emphasis on single-family neighborhoods,” Kilpatrick said.

While none of the communities Housing Next works with have considered outright banning single-family zoning, several are looking at how to increase housing options through ordinances.

Grand Haven Township has proposed new standards in some districts, while Hudsonville is now allowing more housing options near its downtown revitalization district, where once only single-family homes were permitted, Kilpatrick said. As well, Grand Haven is beginning

conversations about new zoning provisions that could allow for more housing types in addition to single-family homes in many districts.

“We’re trying to make sure that this is an option on the menu, and having some of those harder conversations with both planning commissioners and councilors,” Kilpatrick said. “I don’t know to what extent we will be successful at the end of the day in making that an option in more neighborhoods, but it’s definitely something we’re advocating be looked at more seriously.”

The city of Holland is just beginning to discuss residential districts in the rewrite of its unified development ordinance.

“We absolutely won’t be outlawing single-family, but we do have some ideas in terms of smaller standards to perhaps tweak,” Senior City Planner Jenna Elswick told *MiBiz* via email.

Holland will consider decreasing minimum lot size requirements in some areas, and rezoning one neighborhood to allow property owners “to do more with their property on the smaller lots,” according to an Aug. 1 Planning Commission agenda.

The overall goal is to provide for “gentle density” in certain areas to allow for more affordable housing options.

Creating density

One argument for eliminating single-family zoning is that doing so creates density and brings more housing online, thus making it more affordable for people at any price point. The equation is a simple matter of supply and demand, according to industry insiders.

“If you don’t have enough (housing), the prices will go up, and we’ve certainly seen that, but I think we have seen that at a slower rate than we would have otherwise if we hadn’t built almost 6,000 units in the past six years,” Schulz said of the situation in Grand Rapids, which crossed the 200,000 population milestone last summer, according to U.S. Census data.

Communities concerned about affordability can’t simply build more supply because of the costs in today’s construction market, according to Kilpatrick. Therefore, municipalities need to put mechanisms in place to ensure some units remain or become affordable and accessible to residents.

“If you take a ‘do nothing’ approach under the current system, there’s so much demand for those urban, walkable neighborhoods with access to amenities,” Kilpatrick said. “People will out-compete others, and it’s always going to be people with more money.”

Along with allowing more density in most neighborhoods, the city of Grand Rapids is assessing what it can do to incentivize affordable housing based on a series of recommendations in its Housing Now initiative. In March, the City Commission voted to change its zoning ordinance to allow two-family dwellings on corner lots, to create an affordable housing density bonus and to streamline the approval process for accessory dwelling units.

“What this has allowed us to do is not have a difficult, onerous process to get different housing types in the neighborhoods,” Schulz said. “What has resulted from that is a combination of both affordable and market-rate housing being constructed, which helps alleviate some of the demand pressures on existing housing stock.”

Both Schulz and Kilpatrick said separately that it is time for communities to recognize changing demographics and consider how typical zoning practices are hindering natural growth. Younger generations cannot afford the same homes as previous generations, which makes the availability of different housing types a priority, Schulz said.

“If they want to be able to have a strong income base for their community, they want to continue to attract school children into their area to support their public schools, they’re going to have to provide different housing types,” Schulz said.

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